

YOUR
LETTERS

MAILBOX

Where to get parts for your PC, how to avoid excessive postage costs and how to fax using Windows Vista: you're full of useful tips this month. But are your computers full of filth?

★ Fair enough



Further to your reply to Katerina Michael's query in which she discusses replacing a notebook keyboard (*Helpfile, Shopper* November 2007), I thought I might suggest some other places from which I have successfully sourced components.

If you pay for eBay auctions using PayPal, then you can often get bargains by buying from non-UK auctions. The US eBay is a great starting point and you'll often find more parts at better prices than you'll find in the UK.

Online notebook parts specialists (do a Google search to get a good list) are often very expensive, but if you urgently need a part and you're happy to pay a premium, then these stores are often the quickest place to go.

If you can find a computer fair, then there's often a notebook specialist that can help. Last time I had to replace a keyboard on a Mitac chassis I got a sealed manufacturer's original for £40 (after haggling) from the notebook specialist at the weekly Motorcycle Museum computer fair in Birmingham.

Finally, if you are nice when you contact the original manufacturer (not the reseller), it will sometimes sell you a part cheaply. I once sourced a notebook screen like this by sweet-talking someone on the phone.

Hope this helps in your quest for the keyboard.

Simon Grimshaw



▲ Computer fairs are often good places to go for hard-to-find kit and great prices

It just shows that a little determination and hunting around can often bring great results. Your experience is good to hear, as in this day and age of internet shopping we often forget about local suppliers and computer fairs. It's places such as these that you'll often find the experts and specialists that can help you with a very specific problem. Don't forget the manufacturer, of course, as it will often help you out or point you in the right direction.

Has anyone else had a good experience with local computer fairs? Any other tips for hunting down parts to perform your own repairs? Write to us at letters@computershopper.co.uk and let us know.

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CUTTING COSTS



Michael Emmel's experience of expensive postage on SD cards (*Letters, Shopper* October 2007) bought through Amazon Marketplace touches on a widespread practice of retailers charging high postage costs. Amazon Marketplace currently offers thousands of second-hand books for the price of 1p, plus excessive postage and packing which is not visible until late in the booking process.

This problem is even more common on eBay. I offer your readers this tip, which can safeguard you against high postage costs, as well as fraudulent sellers. Before bidding on an expensive eBay item, contact the seller and ask them whether you can collect the item in person, paying cash and removing any postage costs. Even if this is not your intention, the response can be very revealing: any genuine seller should be delighted with this arrangement, avoiding PayPal costs and hassle. A fraudulent seller, however, or one who is making a profit from his postage and packing costs, will usually fabricate a spurious reason why they must post the item, or simply not reply. If the seller responds positively and posts the response on the item listing, you can bid with confidence.

Harry Smith

High postage costs seem to be an increasing problem, and they're all the more annoying when you're buying something very cheap. Ultimately, companies aren't going to change their ways if they can get away with these charges, so it's worth shopping around to find a shop that has lower postage costs. We wish that companies would be more upfront with postage costs, but by hiding this until you've already gone through the hassle of the checkout pages, it's more likely that you'll continue with your purchase.

Your eBay tip is a good one, and anything you can do to increase confidence with a third party is worth trying, especially if it can save you postage fees. There's still a good reason to use PayPal rather than cash, though: PayPal Buyer Protection Policy. This guarantees a safe way to buy products from sellers. If you have a problem with something you've bought, PayPal lets you make a complaint within 45 days of winning an auction for goods that don't turn up or if the product is not as described. Collecting in person ensures that you get the goods, but if you pay in cash and discover a serious problem only when you get home, you've got very little chance of getting a refund.

We'd recommend paying for products with PayPal, even if you make an arrangement to collect goods in person. If you find a seller with extortionate postage



costs, see if you can find the product from someone else with lower costs.

NOT HD ENOUGH

I've just been reading through the LCD TV review in *Shopper*, November 2007. I was rather disappointed to see that you reviewed only 720p HD televisions.

I guess this would be fine for any screen that is 32in and below. However, for any screen above 32in I would seriously consider going to the full HD resolution of 1080p. Are you planning to review 1080p HD TVs, preferably 40in or above, in the near future?

Darrin Maunders

Our recent *Labs* article focused on the best-value products that we could find, and currently that's limited to 720p screens. The 1080p 37in televisions that are currently available are a fair bit more expensive than the sets we reviewed. However, as to whether 1080p screens are ideal for 37in and above, it really depends on who you ask. We've talked to several manufacturers who say that 1080p is only worth it at 42in and above, as it's very difficult to tell the difference between 720p and 1080p at smaller screen sizes.

There are other considerations, too. Most television programmes and most of the content you're likely to watch is standard definition, with a resolution of 720x576. This needs to be upscaled slightly to play on a 720p television's native resolution of 1,280x720; on a 1080p television's native resolution of 1,920x1,080, it's a huge job. This can mean that normal television looks bad on a 1080p HD TV.

That said, with the prices of sets falling all the time, we will be reviewing 1080p TVs in the near future, so keep an eye on our *What's New: Displays* section and *Labs*.

BACK IN A FLASH

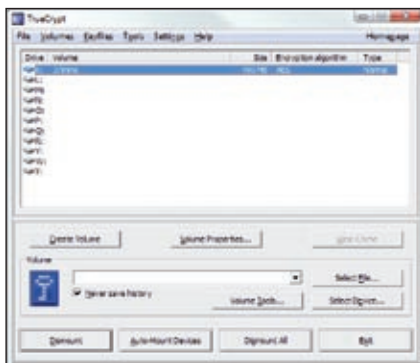
I found a flash drive the other day, but it wasn't marked with a name or address, so I couldn't return it to its owner. I have now put a read-only text file in the root directory of all my flash drives containing my name and address, with the filename 'If found please return to.txt'. I would urge everyone to do the same.

Tom Ruben

That's a good little tip to try to increase the odds of getting a flash drive returned if you lose it. It also helps prove ownership. If anyone's worried about giving their address out, then an email address rather than a postal address should do the job.

If you're going to store private data, particularly on a portable device, you should encrypt it. In the event that you lose your flash drive, nobody else will be able to read the data, so you know it will be kept safe. There are plenty of flash drives that come with encryption software, although you often end up paying more for these. Alternatively, there are lots of software packages that you can use.

TrueCrypt (www.truecrypt.com) is a free, open-source application that lets you create encrypted drive volumes on any type of removable storage. These encrypted drives are password-protected and appear in Windows



▲ TrueCrypt lets you create an encrypted partition on your flash drive, so you can store personal data safely

Explorer, so you can use them just as you would any normal disk. Using TrueCrypt you could, for example, create a 200MB encrypted drive on your USB flash drive; everything you copy to the drive is then encrypted.

TrueCrypt supports Windows Vista, XP, 2000 and Linux, and has a Traveller mode, so it can be run without being installed, which is perfect when you're carrying a flash drive around.

LET'S GET DIRTY

I read your article on PC Cleaning Week on your website, and I attach some images of a truly filthy keyboard I'm using. Do I win one of your Durable cleaning kits?

Toby Gaffney

That truly is a very dirty keyboard and you've proved that you need one of the cleaning kits. It's in the post.

Thanks to all the people that sent us pictures of their PCs. We've still got some cleaning supplies left. Send your pictures to letters@computershopper.co.uk and we'll distribute the remaining kits, courtesy of Durable, which all contain compressed air, screen wipes, telephone wipes, PC wipes and CD/DVD lens cleaner.

WINDOWS VISTA: THE FAX

Microsoft's decision to pull the fax components out of the home edition of Windows Vista hasn't pleased our readers. Here are just a couple of the letters we've received about it.



▲ If your PC looks anything like Toby's, send in a picture and we'll send you a free cleaning kit (while stocks last)

I have read many reviews of Microsoft's Windows Vista operating system, yet none of them, as far as I could see, mentioned that Microsoft has deleted the fax program from both the home versions (Home Basic and Home Premium).

I used to use Windows Fax to send my faxes to, for example, request a repeat prescription. With Windows Vista I have discovered that Windows Fax and Scan is only available in Windows Vista Business, Enterprise and Ultimate editions. How mean of Microsoft to remove something so useful.

A quick Google for fax programs that run under Vista produced little except a shareware program, RKS Fax (www.rkssoftware.com/rksfax/overview.html). I downloaded a trial version and found that it works well, so have bought it. However, this surely should have still been part of the OS; after all, Microsoft charges us enough.

Terry Gallagher

My new computer runs Windows Vista Home Premium. Like others, I was disappointed at the lack of built-in fax software. My old Windows 98 machine ran Symantec's WinFax, but there doesn't seem to be a version of this for Vista.

Looking on the web, I found MightyFax. User reports were good. Following it up online, I found that this was not compatible with Vista either, but that a compatible version was

WRITE IN AND WIN!

Everyone runs out of disk space sooner or later. One way to solve the problem is to send us a great letter. That's because Western Digital has kindly agreed to furnish our Star Letter writers with a capacious 1TB My Book Pro external hard disk. This external drive connects using USB2 or FireWire. It supports both FireWire 400 and 800, and can transfer data twice as fast as some external disks we've tested. It can provide 1TB of storage, or 500GB using the safety-first mirrored mode. This sleek-looking unit comes complete with Retrospect backup software and even has an LED indicator on the front to display how much free disk space remains.



PLUS!

Every published letter-writer who provides their address also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug





being developed. I sent an email, asking to be informed when it was available.

At the end of August, I received a reply saying that a program called RKS Fax 1.12 had just been released. I discovered from the website (www.rkssoftware.com) that this was fax software written for Windows XP and Vista by the writers of MightyFax. A free 30-day trial was offered, while the full version cost \$20 (around £10).

Downloading the program was very quick and easy, as was installation, with no special configuration required. I have now used this fax program for 15 days and shall certainly buy it. It is very well presented, clear, logical and has extensive help information. Faxes are sent to the program as if to a printer (RKS appears as an option in the list of available

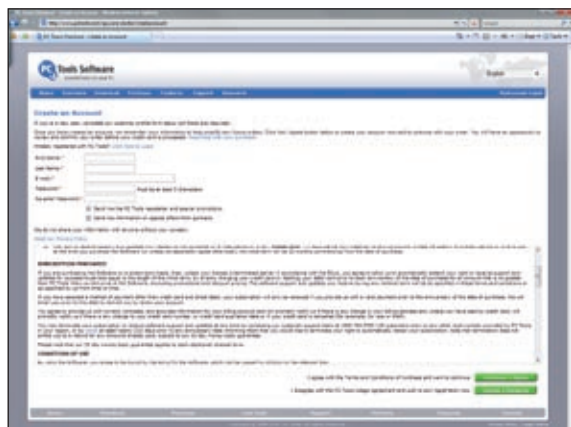
printers). The faxes can be sent at once or stored for future transmission. Faxes can be displayed and edited, and batches of faxes can be sent automatically.

The program also includes the facility to build a fax number address book, so numbers that you call frequently can be selected with no need to type them. There are many other features, too, all beautifully presented.

I had to send an email to ask for guidance on the sending of batches of separate faxes to the same destination without the program needing to redial for each one. An answer from the US told me what to do.

It has been a joy to find such an excellent program. Previously, downloading software had not always been a happy experience.

Dr A R Deacock



▲ Read all the small print when you buy anything online to make sure that you're not signing up for automatic repeat payments

With Vista, Microsoft decided to increase the number of versions, aiming some of them at businesses and some of them at home users. In the process, some arbitrary decisions seem to have been made, and some useful features made available only to business users. The only way to get both the business and home features is to buy Windows Vista Ultimate. However, this is very expensive and, in our opinion, not worth the upgrade.

We're glad that two of our readers have both stumbled on RKS Fax and found it to be a good program. Compared to upgrading

Vista to the Ultimate Edition, £10 is a very reasonable price, especially for a program that seems to be so easy to use.

Buying software isn't the only way around the problem, though, and there are a couple of other avenues you can consider. There are some free web-based fax services, such as www.tpc.int, which are good if you send only an occasional transmission. If you're running a small business, Microsoft's Small Business Server has a built-in fax server, so you can send faxes from any network-connected PC. Finally, many MFPs come with fax facilities, both software and on the device, that you can use. We explained all the different options in more depth in *Business Help*, *Shopper* July 2007.

Are there any other features missing from Vista that annoy you, and any workarounds you've found? Write in and let us know.

CHARGE OF THE LICENCE BRIGADE



I bought some software from PC Tools last year, but this year I've automatically been charged for the software again, even though I haven't expressly permitted this. I'm not having any luck getting a refund. Is it usual practice for companies to act like this?

Michael McLean

When you buy software from PC Tools you have to agree to the company's terms and conditions of purchase. The key phrase, listed under the heading 'Subscription Purchases', says: "If you are purchasing the Software on a subscription basis, then, unless your licence is terminated earlier in accordance with the EULA, you agree

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ABC 83,390 (average monthly sales Jan-Dec 2006)

A DENNIS PUBLICATION

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ISSN 0955-8578

to allow us to automatically extend your right to receive support and updates for successive periods equal to the length of the initial term, by directly charging your credit card or debiting your debit card prior to each anniversary of the date of purchase for an amount that is no greater than PC Tools' then current price of the Software, excluding promotional and discount pricing. The software support and updates you receive during any renewal term will be as specified in these terms and conditions or as specified by us from time to time."

This rather lengthy explanation basically states that you agree that PC Tools can charge your credit card every year to renew your software licence unless you specifically cancel the agreement. The terms go on to say that this should be at least 20 days before the expiry date. That said, you have a 30-day money-back guarantee, which is valid for every renewal.

PC Tools has a US telephone number (00 1800 764 5783) that you can phone. We'd recommend quoting from the terms and conditions to receive a refund.

The practice of signing customers up to repeat contracts is common with security companies and we've seen it a lot with anti-virus programs. Before buying anything online, it's vitally important to read any small print, and you should only buy if you're happy with the terms and conditions.

When faced with repeat subscriptions, you may want to cancel the agreement as soon as you've bought your software. That way you don't need to remember to do it the following year or rely on the software vendor remembering to inform you of the impending payment.

BOXING NOT SO CLEVER



I ordered a copy of Music Maker 12 direct from Magix, which was posted from Hemel Hempstead. I was out when the postman arrived, so I had to drive to the collection office to get it. The attractive box in the Jiffy bag had been crushed in the post. Inside was a 32-page manual and a DVD – nothing else.

It would be easy to create a slim envelope from the artwork on the box and put the manual and DVD in it. All the box does is create a totally useless waste of space. Had more environmentally friendly packaging been used it would have gone through my letterbox, cost less to post and I would not have had to drive six miles to fetch it. Come on, software companies: you should do your bit for the world.

Mike Conder

We couldn't agree more. Packaging can be a real pain, and giant software boxes that contain a disc and thin manual are a nightmare, and they rarely survive being posted.

Instead of ordering a physical version of software, though, have you considered buying the download version instead? Most of the big software companies sell directly in this way, and it's often cheaper to buy the download version than it is to buy the boxed product, plus you save on the postage. It also means you get the software instantly, so there's no need to wait around for the postman. However, if you do use this method, make sure you keep a backup of your installation files, or you could run into trouble if you ever need to reinstall. ☹

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